



Connecting partners: Engagement boundary-spanning roles for community partners

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Summary

Despite their significance for engaged scholarship, community partners' perceptions of successful partnerships are not being widely investigated (Cruz & Giles, 2000). Research is also lacking on boundary spanning by community members in university-community partnerships. Who are the boundary-spanning community leaders that emerge in university-community partnerships, and how can university partners better identify them?

"Boundary spanners" are leaders within the institutions must emerge who can fluidly cross the boundaries of university and community understanding (Friedman and Podolny, 1992; Miller, 2008; Sandmann & Fear, 2001). They help create authentic partnerships composed of multiple stakeholders who recognize the social, cultural, and educational perspectives of the involved members.

Weerts and Sandmann (2010) investigated boundary spanners at public research universities and identified four roles of spanners based on task orientation and social closeness: (a) community-based problem solver, (b) technical expert, (c) internal engagement advocate, and (d) engagement champion.

To apply the Weerts and Sandmann framework from the community perspective, a qualitative instrumental multi-site case study (Stake, 1995) was utilized. Focus groups were held with institutional partners to provide context and identify community members in boundary-spanning roles. Interviews with these community members examined their perceived roles and motivations and their perspectives on the characteristics of community-based boundary spanners.

Data were examined for emergent themes. These findings were examined to ascertain potential for adaptation for community boundary spanners. By providing institutional boundary spanners with the tools and techniques to better locate and engage their community counterparts, this research will contribute to creating and sustaining effective university-community partnerships.

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